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My Name Is Sacha: Fiction and fact in a New Media Era

Michael Hoechsmann & Giuliana Cucinelli

If high-grossing movies can be made with just a video camera and a few guys in a van, the studios might find real competition from every fool with a digital camera and access to YouTube..... If you're under 35, you realize that everything is public now. Even if your racist rant were for a show in Kazakhstan, it would be on the Internet anyway. Never trust anyone under 35. Especially if he has a video camera. (*Time Magazine*, October 29, 2007)

When Sacha Baron Cohen's character Borat made his big screen debut in *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* he was already part of a feedback loop for avid Web 2.0 netizens who had previously received a taste of this immature menace on the YouTube video sharing site. Cohen's first performances of the Borat character had been screened on TV on *Da Ali G Show* and were then recycled across media platforms, particularly Web 2.0 sites such as YouTube. *Da Ali G Show* is a TV program that tests the lines between fact and fiction, a news show with a tongue in cheek edge that borrows from journalistic codes and conventions and comments on various socio-political events throughout the world. Congruent with other fictionalized first person narratives of YouTube producers such as lonelygirl15, Ali G's Borat was just another make believe character in the new circuits of media circulation. Taking his product, or production, to the silver screen was the next innovation, a feature film length video clip that demonstrates the powerful nature of the new first person narratives of the Web 2.0. These narcissistic narratives have become the lingua franca of online video communication and Borat has trumped the denizens of YouTube by cashing in on one such narrative on the silver screens. At once ribald comedy and vulnerable personal narrative, Borat the movie is emblematic of a set of forces at work in contemporary media, a mixture of Web 2.0 narcissistic narrative, the mockumentary style of documentary filmmaking, and the fictionalized veritas of reality TV.

In this era of the quickcam v-idiot, where producing and distributing media

representations is possible for anyone with a camera, an editing suite and broad band capacity to upload to a Web 2.0 application, it is not surprising that quality will sometimes be sacrificed for sake of the unrehearsed, whimsical production. Many producers of media content in the Web 2.0 domains present that which is on their minds, unrefined, narrowly crafted productions that merit little attention. While the whimsical is the currency of content on domains such as YouTube, some amateur media makers have seized the moment to create productions worthy of attention. The interruption of the one-way flow of media, emblematic of the mass media of the previous century, has enabled some extraordinarily creative media messaging to occur. Enabled by an economy of viral, point-to-point, communication, where media messages flow on horizontal axes from producers to consumers, some YouTube producers have found mass audiences for the expression primarily of point of view narratives. The narcissistic forms of story telling that have emerged have also begun to affect the mass media forms of television and film. One of the “effects” of the new media is the documentary form of fictionalized cinema verite.¹ This new form relies on a hybrid of old style and new media production techniques and narrative conventions, where direct cinema² meets the webcam and becomes the instant pudding of contemporary media.

When director Larry Charles joined forces with Cohen to create *Borat*, they set out to explore the reality of American culture with the intention of providing probing and humorous commentary, but without making any claims to scientific veracity. Charles and Cohen cobbled together a number of genres and techniques of media production to create a fictionalized mockumentary, a satirical film that was both a work of fiction and a documentary. Demonstrating the power of the feature film industry to emulate and extend the amateur productions of YouTube, *Borat* was a popular and economically viable hit release. Since its release in November 2006, the film has grossed over \$260 million dollars worldwide, and has earned Cohen an Oscar nomination and a Golden Globe. The questions *Borat* the movie raise for media criticism are multifold. To what extent is this feature length movie an extension of amateur videos on the Web 2.0? To what extent is *Borat* the film a new form of viral communication? Where is the line between fiction and documentary? Is a fictionalized mockumentary more revealing of truth than is a documentary based in realism? Where are the lines of truth and fiction in media storytelling today?

Boratumentary

To begin to understand the *Borat* phenomenon, we need to first explore the space it occupies within the history of media. Over the last decade, many media texts have blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction, including reality TV, comedic newscasting, and viewer produced media. Reality TV shows³ have become the surprising innovation in television programming, low budget fictionalized

“reality” spectacles that have caught on in a big way with audiences looking for television content that addresses their lives in a raw, affective manner. Like *Borat*, these programs not only blur the fine line between reality and fiction, but also set out to use this tension as a means to draw in audiences schooled in media skepticism. Raised on television, contemporary audiences no longer care about the boundaries between reality and fiction, but seek narratives that raise questions of ethics and value in the hedonistic, secular contexts of a postmodern world. Alongside reality TV, we have also witnessed in the past decade a tremendous growth of irreverent journalistic programs like *Da Ali G Show* that used parody, jamming, remixing and comedy to report on the news. Television shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* in the U. S. and *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* in Canada probe the top news stories of the day in humorous and ironic fashions.

Programs such as these have satisfied jaded television audiences seeking an alternative from standard news programming that presents news within what is now a highly contested myth of objectivity and neutrality. Finally given a chance to talk back, audiences have embraced new media outlets such as YouTube that have created sites for them to play in the spaces between fact and fiction, producer and viewer. In the interstices of fan fiction, media production and online distribution, everyday viewers can become stars and recast themselves for the eyes of other. Whether it is a Hollywood director, or a kid next door, any media maker can tamper with truth and rely on the privileged conventions of the documentary and journalism genres to make an apparently credible, albeit fictional account. Given these developments, we are occupying new spaces in media storytelling that challenge assumptions we had previously held. If it were the case that all that was solid in media accounts of fact and fiction has now melted into air, we could yearn for a golden age. However, what we have now is simply a destabilizing of assumptions of verisimilitude that provides us an opportunity to look more critically at that which we have taken for granted.

In fact, questions of reality and fiction have been central to the development of the documentary genre since the early days of cinema. When documentary films first appeared, many people were skeptical about this new form of art. The first experiments in cinema, such as the Lumiere brothers’ *Workers Leaving a Factory* and *The Gardener* (1895), were films that left ambiguous the staged nature of the filmic spectacle. Here the camera played the role of God, directing the viewers’ eyes and selecting and deflecting elements from the reality of the setting. Many argue this was a precursor to the documentary style, while others believe these shorts were a first attempt at fiction. Regardless, audiences were astonished with the way in which reality was captured and transformed by film. As documentary developed into its own genre, set apart from the fictional narratives that dominated audience attention in the early era of the silver screen, the stakes grew larger, this genre somehow carrying the baggage of truth telling for the cinematic apparatus. And questions abounded about the truth or fiction of this new form of representation, or “factual entertainment” (Bruzzi, p.120).

In 1930, John Grierson published an essay called “First Principles of Documentary” which acted as a manifesto for documentary makers over the years. In his manifesto, Grierson defines documentary as “creative treatment of actuality” and emphasizes that documentary has a sensational capacity for revealing that which is taken for granted and commonplace, that which time has worn smooth (in Hardy, p.37). Grierson felt that the “original” actor and “original” scene are better guides than their fictional counterparts for interpreting the modern world, and that materials “thus taken from the raw” can be more real than that which is acted (in Hardy, p.37).

Though the term documentary was not yet in use at the time, Robert J. Flaherty is credited with making the first feature length documentary film, *Nanook of the North* (1922). Flaherty tried to capture the life of Canada’s Inuit people as accurately as possible, providing a natural view of their everyday actions and interactions. While he tried to portray reality, he had to do so with the bulky and primitive film equipment of the day and hence many of his scenes are staged, despite being shot with amateur actors portraying their own lives as accurately as they normally would. He also altered reality somewhat by imposing a nostalgic view on the film, asking, for example, his subjects to hunt with traditional weapons rather than modern rifles. As the concept of documentary evolved, artificiality became increasingly contested and eventually embraced. Other documentary makers experimented with camera techniques and film montage to enhance the genre’s capacities for truth telling, recognizing the impossibility of a pure, authentic documentary form.⁴

The Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov is a key figure in the history of the documentary form and cinema in general, one who recognized the intervention of the camera and tried to utilize it artistically to enhance reality. Vertov was one of the early innovators of documentary technique, deploying elements of filmmaking such as freeze frame, fast and slow motion, close ups and jump cuts, but he is most recognized for his pioneering approach to filmmaking called Kino-Pravda (cinema truth). Vertov’s work is central to understanding what truth means to, and in, a documentary film. Best known for his documentary *Man and a Movie Camera* (1929) that shows people undertaking aspects of their daily life, Vertov attempted to construct reality with an avant-garde style. He toyed with a theory called *cine-eye*, based on the idea that the camera eye, with its lenses, editing, and other production aspects, could render reality more accurately than the human eye. Vertov engaged in camera experiments and image juxtapositions that he believed could demonstrate how the raw materials of everyday life as caught by the camera could be synthetically reconstructed into a naturalistic order (Nichols, p.144). The legacy of documentary filmmakers such as Flaherty, Grierson and Vertov has created a genre that recognizes filmic reality as self-consciously constructed. It is not a naturalistic medium, and hence the goofy on camera antics of Sacha Cohen do not necessarily render *Borat* less meaningful, or real, than other documentary films. But there are clearly some new developments at play in *Borat*, relating to developments in the media over the past decade.

For the purposes of this article, we eschew some of the differences between platforms such as television, documentary film and user-produced Web 2.0 video. Our purpose is to examine contemporary forms of media storytelling that purport to uncover and represent truth or reality. Reality TV, recent mockumentaries by Michael Moore and others⁵ and online viral docudramas made by purportedly authentically real people, have further clouded the distinction between the real and the fictional. To a great extent, it simply no longer matters if a filmic representation is real or not. Audiences play the role of arbiter, deciding whether to accept or reject a particular product as authentic or not. We believe that *Borat* inherits the baggage of the documentary genre, but carries alongside the more recent legacy of reality TV, mockumentaries and Web 2.0 user-produced videos. Ultimately, we feel that *Borat* is an extended version of the same video clips already circulating online, including those produced by Cohen/Ali G. In the following section, we consider Web 2.0 production and “reality,” drawing on the case of lonelygirl15. Lonelygirl15 is, for all extents and purposes, the reverse of *Borat*. She pretended to be authentic and was exposed as a ruse. Borat, the character, is a ruse, but he can be exposed too as an authentic representation of an archetype of contemporary society.

Viral Borat

With advances in interactive media and technology, first the Web 1.0 of the World Wide Web and e-mail and now the Web 2.0 of social networking and user-driven content generation, communication is becoming increasingly viral. Most scenes from *Borat* the film are posted online and circulate on such websites as YouTube and Google Video. A compilation video posted on YouTube with *Borat*’s best moments has received over three million hits and close to 2000 comments. The notion of viral communication derives from the concept of point to point contact, an actual one to one transmission that quickly multiplies exponentially as more people become involved in communicating a given message or idea. An originary message or idea is referred to as a meme, a viral knowledge node that seeks out other minds to propagate itself further (Lankshear & Knobel 2003). This concept is a way of conceptualizing a type of face-to-face communication that has been around for millennia but that has now been given a technological delivery system and a high speed, worldwide distribution network. Whereas formerly memes could only pass to and from people in several degrees of separation from one another, now total strangers can learn directly from one another. Thus, ideas can proliferate across space and time at a speed and scale formerly unimaginable. And whereas in an era of mass media, a small number of powerful corporations controlled the air waves, in this interactive media environment, virtually anyone—the virtual every one—can at least try to transmit their ideas to a broad audience and as ideas come into contact with other, new knowledge can form. Borat the movie trades on the popular commerce of memes. His ribald humour is primarily derivative. His jokes

are not new, but rather are performative utterances based on stereotypes and folk wisdom.

New media outlets and social networking sites such as YouTube not only showcase such performative displays but also enable and enhance the circulation of such memes for a worldwide audience. Borat, like other *celebrities* (internet celebrities) such as lonelygirl15, expresses the ideas and ways of being already in circulation. Borat has the uncanny ability to tap into our lives and touch our most sensitive nerve with his childlike verbiage. His slapstick humor covers up his bigotry and his ignorance as showcased by his racial slurs and genuine moments of outrageous behavior. This performative self is the truth in fictionalized clothes. Like lonelygirl15, Borat walks the ever-thin line between what is accepted and what is expected by the viewers in this age of viral communication. Lonelygirl15 arose as one of the early celebrities of the v-log. Ironically, and as we found out later, lonelygirl15 was everything that the usual Web 2.0 performer is not—she auditioned for the part, read from scripts, and was produced professionally with proper lighting, camera, and editing. It turned out that this girl was not lonely, but surrounded by a production team, and certainly not 16, as she had claimed, but rather a 19-year-old actress called Jessica Rose hired to create a new online franchise. Despite or because of the notoriety of being outed by her audience, lonelygirl15 was chosen as a spokesperson for the UN Millenium Campaign to fight global poverty and a v-log was posted to YouTube at a second lonelygirl15 channel, lg15standup.

Standing up against global poverty might not have been the predicted outcome the lonelygirl15 organizers had bargained for, but it suited their goals of creating and sustaining her brand identity. They counted on the “affective economics” (Jenkins, 2006) of identification others would have for her. Lonelygirl15 was, for a time, every girl, someone working through her turmoil and problems online, but a legitimate girl teens could identify with or a girl next door. When the jig was up, when it was revealed that lonelygirl15 was a hoax, the backlash was immediate and massive in scale, but modest in emotional force. The outing of lonelygirl15, that YouTube character that was ultimately too scripted and too neatly produced to be authentic, was international news. When the story broke that lonelygirl15 was a fake, all hell broke loose—for a week or so. This event was published and debated more widely than the average flood or famine in the global South. But the backlash online was modest and receded quickly. “How dare she,” shrieked the regulars of the YouTube (virtual) community. Beyond a certain smugness on the part of some of her online rivals, nobody really seemed to care, and it has not stopped her from continuing with her YouTube presence.

The needs of this audience for an affective alliance with a reliable YouTube regular was greater than a rational response of anger or rejection. YouTube is a media environment co-created by its audience, a vehicle for the distribution of videos, both good and bad, free of charge and to a potential audience of millions. If there is a prevailing ethos at YouTube, it is one typical of the lightheartedness

of the peer to peer communication of youth—have a laugh, don't take things too seriously. When push came to shove and the ruse was exposed, the audience did not abandon her. The audience cared enough for her and wasn't ready to lose lonelygirl15. Like lonelygirl15, Borat is an interloper, a ruse. He plays willfully with audience expectations of verisimilitude, casting himself as believable, trustworthy and authentic, all the while hoodwinking his unsuspecting interviewees. Here he differs from lonelygirl15/Jessica Rose who began her escapades on YouTube disguising her true identity. Cohen/Borat does no such thing. His audience knows he is a fake, or, at minimum, an actor.

As we move from one era of media to another, truth-claims stand at the forefront of our imaginations, the unresolved issue of new media times. Where does the "real" end, and where does the fictionalized veritas begin? In the older era, we had some conceptual tools to help us along. The "willing suspension of disbelief," a term coined by Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1817) to describe how readers disengage from reality and suspend their skepticism for a brief period to enjoy a piece of fiction, is used similarly in media theory to describe the way audiences ignore the troubling vagaries of truth/fiction in order to embrace a fictional narrative. Over time, media audiences have grown weary of this task, seeking something more meaningful than much of the mainstream fare of Hollywood movies and TV. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the earliest, and most impacting, examples of new media production are predicated on verisimilitude. We are who we are, auteurs of the v-log; all of our narcissism is just the baggage we carry. Borat, in this lens, is high art narcissism. Lonelygirl15 and earnest YouTube critics such as LazyDork are examples of popular culture, lowbrow merchants of truths or falsehoods who hide behind the pretense of the "real." The successful ones lead the parade of narcissistic pretenders who are YouTube "stars."

Issues of narcissism don't lead to easy resolution. The stars era of the mass media (Dyer, 1986) cultivates narcissism as art. When the lower stratum, the unrefined denizens of the new Web communities, attempt to draw on star power to project their image as somehow worthy of audience adulation, they unsettle the dynamics of the us/them relations established and sedimented in traditional media. Here Cohen/Borat rides to the rescue, even when riding on a mule drawn carriage into a celebrity gala. Borat is the first old style celebrity of the new media age. He checks his authenticity at the door; he is an actor playing a part in a faux documentary which is both a fictionalized feature film and a telling, revealing documentary about America at the turn of the new millennium.

So what truths does *Borat* the movie reveal? While sidestepping questions of fiction and truth in storytelling, *Borat* the movie is nonetheless an instructive tale, at once the story of an overindulgent and parochial America and of the innocent immigrant thrust into the cultural melee. It is the story of a narrow minded culture of excess, a self assured and inward looking America that is bigoted, outlandish and arrogant. Various contributions to this volume take up these themes.

Our interest in the narcissistic elements of new media storytelling bring us to our focus on the Borat character. Borat is the ultimate “bohunk,” the White-faced Eastern European immigrant and “other.” Hidden from Western eyes for the last half of the 20th century, Eastern Europeans have begun to reemerge on the world stage and Borat is one of the first to portray an Eastern European who is not a spy, soldier, or criminal. As happy go lucky as the Black Sambo, a naïve Tonto, and a sexually dangerous Caliban, Borat floods the imaginary with the excesses of a primitive dystopia that time forgot. These archetypes of otherness derive from a racialized history of cultural encounter between the European and American North and the post-conquest South. But hidden behind the Iron Curtain and isolated from the grand narratives of world history, the Eastern European represents another form of primitive—a culture, or set of cultures, held in suspension, frozen in the permafrost of cultural isolation from the circuits of global capital. He represents the half way there of a culture suspended between modernism and postmodernism, a culture that missed the transitional stages leading from modernity and is struggling to catch up. He is not a “noble savage,” untouched by the modern era, but a new form that we will call “commie savage.” His is a land of clock radios and VCRs, a land of cast off technologies, the recycled gizmos from Western culture. He comes to the table of North American overconsumption with a simple, yet unsatiable appetite for the stuff of modern life, carrying with him the baggage of a rustic, authentically modern world.

Borat stands in for the everyday life of the immigrant to North America. He lacks what Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital” (1964) and, particularly, its articulation in embodied dispositions, or “habitus.” Borat’s ungainliness and awkwardness serve to differentiate him from the presumably refined ways of being, casually enacted by born and bred North Americans regardless of class background. Borat’s lack of knowledge and manners is most evident in his toilet and sexual behaviour. Whether defecating on a busy New York street or washing his face from a toilet bowl, Borat is clearly an uncouth anachronism in a society obsessed with cleanliness and in total denial of the lower bodily functions. When he appears at a dinner table with a bag of excrement in his hands, he confirms his status as cultural outsider. This cultural faux pas of the commie savage serves at once as proof of the cultural superiority of America and the backwardness of the former republics of the Soviet empire. In a culture obsessed with sanitation, this action provokes horror and disbelief.

Where Borat walks on fertile American soil is in his enactments of virile masculinity. He is obsessed with sex, much like the culture that he has come to chronicle, but unlike most of the members of that culture, he hides nothing. Whether masturbating in public, wrestling naked or in his underwear with his male friends, or asserting his desire and right to have any woman at any time, Borat is not only polymorphously perverse, but aggressively sexual. If fictionalized accounts enable difficult questions to be raised, then this is where Borat the character raises the questions that America denies. He is the truth to America’s half-truths, a culture

immersed in sexualized icons that is quicker to impeach presidents over infidelity than over warfare. The happy-go-lucky nature of American male sexuality is fueled by the mass media industries where the mantra “sex sells” is taken for granted, but also by a huckster culture of masculine excess, best represented in the American passions for sports and war. American men, as interpellated by the media and government are obsessed with killing and f***ing. Borat only aspires to the latter, but he does so with a libidinal bravado beyond the norm. Borat transgresses culturally held values precisely at the point of verisimilitude. He takes at face value common sense assumptions that are nestled in the imaginary of the American male, acting out that which is represented in the media as though it were the reality of gender relations in America.

Ultimately, *Borat* is an instructive tale. It reveals a culture of excess and a sexuality run amok. It tells an archetypal story of a newcomer who dares to transgress, who will not conform to the deadening of senses required by the social decorum of a society that lives a deeply contradictory lie. And *Borat* is an example of a new hybrid form of documentary, both ironic, comedic mockumentary and high art narcissistic viral communication that trades on what Henry Jenkins calls “transmedia navigation” (2006), storytelling across media platforms in an era of media convergence. Watching *Borat* is enriched by viewing other material available online, including those clips that landed on the cutting room floor and those which predate the filming of the feature length movie, but introduce and provide further context for the character and the concept. And, of course, seeing Cohen/Borat take the gag further by performing in character on various talk shows, demonstrates that the show no longer ends when the final credits roll. When Martha Stewart teaches Cohen/Borat how to make a bed under Jay Leno’s watchful eyes on *The Tonight Show*, the circular funhouse of mirrors that is North American media is on full display. An authentically real convicted felon who is a household name for her domestic arts provides lessons on how to perfectly tuck in sheets to a fictional character in a televised spectacle viewed by television audiences and recycled across multiple Web 2.0 Internet sites. The twists and turns in this departure from anything like the everyday reality of most people is beyond comprehension, yet this is truth and reality in a hyper-mediated world. Borat’s cultural learnings of postmodern media for make benefit glorious media interpretation, indeed.

Notes

¹ Cinema verite is a sub-genre of “observational” documentary that emphasizes the presence of the camera within the location. The camera is used to provoke the subjects and they are encouraged to react to the situations knowing that the camera is present.

² Direct cinema is also a sub-genre of observational documentary and aims to capture reality as accurately as possible through the use of handheld shots and on location shooting. It is often associated with documentaries created in North America during 1958-1962. There are many similarities between cinema-verite and direct cinema, but the main difference is

that direct cinema aims to neutralize the presence of the camera and hence not alter the reaction of the subjects.

³ Reality TV emerged in the 1990s with shows such as *The Real World* (MTV), *Survivor* (CBS), *The Simple Life* (FOX) and *Big Brother* (CBS). It is a genre of television that captures “reality” through various settings and game like programming. Many reality television based programs have a surveillance/voyeurism focused approach. Although reality television producers tend to state that their programs are not scripted, many viewers and critics question the authenticity of these shows.

⁴ Arguably, the mediating influence of cameras and sound and lighting equipment make a pure documentary impossible. The emergence of the apparatus of the surveillance video camera and the street webcam in recent times might offer the resolution to a conundrum that has plagued documentary film since its beginnings: how can we film human subjects in their natural surroundings without staging the shot? Of course, these modern technologies only portray reality settings when the human subjects are unaware of their presence.

⁵ Michael Moore has become one of the most influential documentary makers of contemporary culture. In 1989, he produced and directed the controversial *Roger & Me*, which comments on General Motors CEO Roger Smith’s decision to shutdown and move various GM factories from Flint, Michigan. Since then, he has produced and directed *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), and more recently *Sicko* (2007). As a result of Moore’s popularity, many similar documentaries have received critical attention and the genre itself has regained immense popularity with work like Albert Nerenberg’s *Stupidity* (2003), Morgan Spurlock’s *Supersize Me* (2004) and Robert Greenwald’s *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005).

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